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Choice Reading and the Intersection of Literacy and Democracy

By Scott Hebenstreit

In the beginning of my teaching career, I wasn't a reader. Teaching English was a job, and it was a job I was passionate about, but it wasn't my life. I never had the time to read, and college taught me all I needed to do my job. That year, I taught a unit on *The Outsiders*; some of my students did their reading, and some didn't. At the time, I was frustrated with the non-readers. I look back now and wonder what I expected - how could my students find joy in this work when I didn't think it was worth doing myself?

For my students, and for me, English class was like an appointment with the dentist: everyone knew his or her role, and that there were people practicing dental hygiene (or reading) on some beautiful, transcendent level, but we were all too busy for that. No one has time to floss, and no one has time to read.

Now, six years into my teaching career, I've made independent reading a focus of my classroom. I've done away with *The Outsiders* altogether. Years ago, I noticed that some of my students weren't reading it, and talked to a few about it. Those conversations revealed that they didn't see any value in reading. From that point on, I endeavored to make that value a focus of my classroom.

I try to lead a literate life to model good behavior for my students; each day, I listen to audiobooks on my ride to and from work. During my lunch periods, I read. I'm always pushing myself to grow and to read harder texts because I cannot expect my students to grow as readers – and as people – if they don't learn to push themselves.

One of my recent choices was Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media*. In one of the first chapters of the book, Chomsky and Herman compare media coverage of Jerzy Popieluszko's 1984 murder to hundreds of murders in Latin America from 1964-1985. The authors explain that this one murder received more media coverage than the sum of hundreds of cases in Latin America; they then use the disparity in coverage to examine media bias (Herman and Chomsky 41).

The thought occurred to me as I listened to this chapter that atrocities occur across the globe that we simply cannot learn about. Try as we might, there is only so much print space - and media willingness - to cover the events in our world. I felt crushed by the knowledge that a willingness to learn wasn't enough; no matter how hard a person tries, there may not be information available to teach them about their world.

In that moment, I thought about my teaching, and I thought about my students. More than that, I thought about the educational system as a whole. *Who decides what a student can and cannot access?* I wondered. Could a well-intentioned student who didn't read at home, and who was too busy to teach him or herself, gain a rich understanding about our world?

In *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky and Herman explore the filters through which information passes

on its way to consumers. They present the different interests that affect media coverage, demonstrating the way that these interests decide on (or filter) the facts that consumers can access. The book demonstrates that conveying Truth is not the role of the media in a capitalist society. Instead, a variety of interests exert their will on the news, deciding what is fit to print.

Chomsky and Herman's propaganda model focuses on the complex private media system in America, but I wondered about the applicability of their work to education; after all, students' belief systems are directly influenced by the work they do in school. In an era of massive political polarization, teachers must consider what beliefs shape the educational experiences of their students (Suh).

In the introduction to *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky and Herman explain that "The raw material of news must pass through successive filters, leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print. They fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place, and they explain the basis and operations of what amount to propaganda campaigns." Their list is as follows:

- (1) the size... ownership... and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms;
- (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media;
- (3) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and "experts..."
- (4) [media critique] as a means of disciplining the media
- (5) "anti-communism" as a national religion and control mechanism. (2)

I believe that there are also filters of information in the education system. Texts and information are necessarily categorized into teachable and taboo texts. Our students are powerless in this process; they simply receive the information that others have decided is appropriate. Their text choices are, just like the news, affected by a number of filters:

1. School board members, who choose to approve or disapprove instructional texts
2. District curriculums, which often require teachers to work with an approved genre or text
3. Canonization of a literary text, which is often used to determine that book's value both in and apart from a curriculum
4. Parent support for chosen texts
5. Administrative support for chosen texts
6. Teacher support for a text

To quickly summarize this concept, imagine yourself as a teacher who planned to bring a new book into your classroom. Say, for instance, you are planning to teach John Green's *Looking For Alaska* next year, or you are planning to read excerpts from Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* in class. What would you expect to be a problem in this process? Who could stop you from teaching these texts - and why would they stop you?

As an educator, I've heard the same conversation countless times: "You can't play that in class! It's great, but the parents would riot!" Or, "That's a great idea, but you should hope no one calls the school complaining about it." Finally, there is this comment: "It's a great book, but there's no chance a school board would approve of it."

In some cases, these conversations are fair. *Looking for Alaska*, for instance, might not be developmentally appropriate content for all students. But the question remains: Who is making these

decisions? Are they made democratically - in a way that represents minority students' voices? The idea of keeping certain works out of the hands of students is, on the surface, pragmatic. While *Beloved* teaches powerful truths about slavery, there are students who are not emotionally prepared for it. The system's filters are designed to prevent teachers from providing students content that could cause harm or create controversy.

At the same time, however, I wonder about a process that involves qualitative decisions on behalf of students. Such a system is built on biases that may not represent marginalized groups who are not on school boards or in school administrations. Approximately 4.5 percent of Americans identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. And about 25 percent of Americans are non-white, with another 18 percent of Americans identifying as Hispanic and Latino (Fitzsimmons). When we look at our curriculums, though, are American students experiencing literature that is as diverse as our nation?

One way to examine the texts that make their way to our students is to examine the books that are commonly taught and the books that are commonly challenged. It must be noted, though, that these books that are challenged are ones that have *already passed through* several filters: they are texts that teachers found worthwhile enough to teach; ones that districts may have added to official curricula; and books that were previously approved by school board members. In the process of reaching this point, many books are abandoned by teachers afraid of conflict with the decision-making apparatus.

According to the American Library Association, the ten most challenged books in 2017 were:

1. *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher
2. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie
3. *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier
4. *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini
5. *George* by Alex Gino
6. *Sex is a Funny Word* by Cory Silverberg
7. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee
8. *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas
9. *And Tango Makes Three* by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson
10. *I am Jazz* by Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings

The ALA also explains the reasoning behind some of these challenges. *Thirteen Reasons Why*, for instance, was “challenged and banned by multiple school districts because it discusses suicide.” *Drama* “was challenged and banned in school libraries because it includes LGBT characters.” *George* was challenged because of the presence of transgendered characters: *And Tango Makes Three* is consistently challenged because of its portrayal of gay relationships (“Top Ten Most Challenged”).

In many cases, these texts introduce students to the plight of minority populations that they otherwise may not experience. At the same time, however, teaching these texts (or, in many cases, simply having them available in a school) is difficult. These texts that are often filtered out of students' hands are in many cases texts that provide to students representation of difficult social, historical, or racial issues. These texts can be windows into others' lives, but in many cases, they are kept out of students' hands.

Thirteen Reasons Why, for instance, is a text that many teachers would willingly avoid. At the same

time, it is important for students: its examination of the effects of bullying, sexual assault, and suicide may be a high school student's only honest exposure to those issues. *Thirteen Reasons Why*'s main character, Hannah Baker, commits suicide after she is raped at a party. Some may say that this is too much for a high school student; however, according to RAINN, "1 out of every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime (14.8% completed, 2.8% attempted)." In filtering that information out of students' hands, we sanitize their experience and prevent them an honest interaction with sexual assault ("Scope of the Problem").

The Illinois Library Association also publishes a list of challenged texts. The list is fraught with challenges to texts written by minority authors: it features a novel by Jacqueline Woodson; several by Toni Morrison; one by James Baldwin; and *Iqbal*, a book about a Pakistani boy escaping bonded labor. Parents argued that Morrison and Baldwin's texts were too visceral for students to experience. Even when schools do not ban these texts, parent complaints have a chilling effect on teacher choice. Why would a teacher use Baldwin or Morrison's novels when another that won't face complaints is available? The result is that some voices - especially those that examine difficult racial, sexual, or gender issues - are removed from the conversation (Doyle).

And, unfortunately, conversations about race, gender, and sexuality are often taboo in America. These texts are challenged heavily because, in some cases, they tell the brutal truth of what racism in America looked like in another era. In other cases, these books expose students to unhappy and unsafe worlds apart from their own. School boards, administrators, and teachers often work to avoid these texts because no district wants to court controversy. They choose other, more acceptable texts instead. The filters of information mean that in each step in the process, student exposure to complex topics is limited by the beliefs of the few.

There is a way, however to offer to students a curriculum as diverse as their world, which is illustrated by the following anecdote and reflection:

I teach in a well-off area in central New Jersey. My district has some racial diversity, but in most cases students are white or Asian. One day this school year, however, one of my sixth-grade students entered the classroom with a copy of *The Hate U Give* which she borrowed from the town's library.

I thought about this student, whose life experience was likely limited to the suburban/rural lives of those around her and wondered about what it was that made her choose that book. When I sat down to speak to her, however, she amazed me. She talked to me about the way the main character struggled to regain her voice after the shooting of a black teenager in her area. I thought back to my own experiences with Trayvon Martin's death. I was a 22-year-old college graduate when the news was announced, and here I was, six years later, with an 11-year-old student enthusiastically talking me through the intricacies of a similar event. *The Hate U Give*, however, is absent from my school's library, because it is considered too mature for students in my school. Likely, the concern is that a student may borrow the book and the district may receive a complaint. And it's understandable why someone would have that concern: *The Hate U Give* appears on the ALA's list of frequently challenged books cited earlier.

When these filters of information prevent information from reaching our students, they prevent students from growing as people. That is the flaw in this system. By denying students certain texts, we deny them access to alternate perspectives.

In 2016, *Science* published a study on perspective-taking. In that study, authors showed that a simple 10-minute conversation about the issues that transgender people face was enough to affect people's prejudices towards that group. *Science's* review of the study explained that "In all cases, the 10-minute interview included a survey before and after to measure people's attitudes regarding transgender people, as well as follow-ups ranging up to 3 months later... The canvassing technique virtually erased the transgender prejudices of about one in 10 people, and the change lasted at least 3 months." The simple act of *exposing* a person to the issues that a marginalized group faces is enough to have a lasting impact on the way he or she sees that group. Why, then, do we limit students' exposure to stories that illustrate those struggles? (Bohannon et al).

In another article published in *Science*, authors David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano demonstrated specifically that reading literature enables enhanced perspective-taking. The pair studied children before and after reading fiction and demonstrated that students showed enhanced "capacity to comprehend that other people hold beliefs and desires and that these may differ from one's own beliefs and desires" (Kidd and Castano).

If our students are to survive in a world of increasing political polarization and prejudice, we must be aware of the fact that the texts we teach often only provide some sides of the story. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for instance, is often taught in American literature courses to explore the history of American racism. As writer Andray Domise points out, though, students cannot learn the realities of race through the book. He writes, "As a teaching narrative on the reality of race, however, [Mockingbird] is helplessly facile and ill-suited. It is a story told through the voice of a white child, Scout Finch, centred on the toils of her white father, Atticus Finch, and whose conflict rests on the judicial fate of a black man, Tom Robinson."

The truth is that it's *easy* for teachers to work with *To Kill A Mockingbird*. It's a canonized American text because it won the Pulitzer Prize; teachers have taught (or even been taught!) the book in the past; school book rooms have copies available for teacher use; school boards often approve of it. And yet Domise has a great point about the text. It is a fundamentally limited story (Domise). Domise offers alternative texts, but, as noted earlier, even Toni Morrison's novels are frequently challenged for their portrayal of racial realities. Instead, we need to offer students the opportunity to explore race through texts that, in many cases, will not be approved by school boards. The key, here, is not in choosing better texts about race or sexuality; many texts that teach the realities of these issues are challenged and avoided by teachers and administrators. I am not arguing in favor of teachers fighting against their school boards and administrations, because in some cases those fights put teacher livelihoods in a less secure position.

Instead, I think that these issues – the nature of the texts available to our students, and difficulty of teaching texts that fairly represent a diverse society – lead inexorably to a solution that bypasses many of the filters of information altogether. That solution is student choice.

In a 1950s Supreme Court decision, the court ruled that, "'The mere act of purchasing a book to be added to the school library does not carry with it any implication of the adoption of the theory or dogma contained therein, or any approval of the book itself, except as a work of literature fit to be included in a reference library'" ("Notable First Amendment Cases").

Therein lies the answer to the problem of censorship in schools – when a text is not taught as a whole class novel but is instead an available choice text, a teacher and a school district are not

endorsing the content within the text. The ALA cites several Supreme Court challenges to a student's First Amendment right to read, and in each situation, students' rights to read have been affirmed.

As educators, we are tasked with helping students to understand the world around them. Our choices, though, are often constrained by the conditions in which we work. While options exist, such as canonized texts and texts that have passed school board approval, it is imperative that teachers consider offering their students choice in their reading. In offering students broad choice and providing engaging options, teachers can enable students to better participate in a diverse society.

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“Self Portrait” by **Cole Bepalko**, a senior from Northern Highlands Regional high school. Cole is currently awaiting college decisions and is planning on pursuing degrees in fine arts and film.